

NOTE ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE MODI
CHARACTERS

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THE Devanāgarī alphabet has been shown by Bühler to have been derived from the Brahmi, in which the earliest documents and most of Asoka's inscriptions are written. With the revival of Sanskrit learning and literature, which took place in the fourth and fifth centuries A.D. under the Gupta emperors, the development of the Brahmi script proceeded apace. The first step or innovation was the method adopted by which the letters were made to hang from the horizontal top-line. This line first appears to a marked degree in the period, dating from 350 after Christ, but becomes only fully developed in the scripts *circa* A.D. 800-1200. Thus the *p* of the Baijnāth Prasasti (A.D. 804) has an open top, but appears with a closed top, प, in the Kanheri cave inscriptions, only to open out again in the tenth century. The character may be regarded as having become fixed in the eleventh century (*vide* Bhimadeva's script A.D. 1029). And similarly with other letters.

Moḍī may, from a critical examination of the letters and reasoning from general considerations, be regarded as cursive Devanāgarī. It is possible in the case of the fifteen consonants, which depart from the Devanāgarī norm, to see the development occurring before one's eyes, so to speak, and to trace such developments according to three main underlying principles. These are: (i) the effort to keep the pen from being lifted from the paper; (ii) the introduction of the connective stroke 𑂔, either (*a*) in the case of those consonants, which in Devanāgarī would end at the bottom of the line, or (*b*) as an addition to the letter to represent the sound *ā* and its derivatives *o* and *au*; (iii) the general simplification of curves in the body of the corresponding Devanāgarī letter. As an example of the first principle we have the Devanāgarī व made 𑂔, where the lower half of the semicircle is brought right down to the bottom of the line to receive the upward perpendicular stroke. The latter, when it has reached the top of the line, serves as the starting-point for the following letter, e.g. वर = 𑂔𑂔, "upon," "above."










The second principle can well be illustrated by taking the letter द = 𑂔 = द + 𑂔. The tail of the द serves as a means of joining

the connective stroke 𑂔 thereto, and thus the top of the line is again reached. Again 𑂔 = 𑂔 = 𑂔 + 𑂔.

Perhaps the best illustration of the third process is the Devanāgarī letter 𑂔 = Moḍī 𑂔 = 𑂔 + 𑂔, i.e. simplification of the curved upper portion into 𑂔 plus addition of the connective 𑂔 to the long tail [𑂔 + 𑂔 + 𑂔 = 𑂔].

In mediaeval times writing was confined mainly to formal documents. It is therefore, on general considerations, only reasonable to suppose that the fixation of the Devanāgarī script preceded, probably by several centuries, the development of the cursive Moḍī. We find the same order in the Kharoṣṭī script. Asoka's inscriptions on the Shabāzgarhī and Manseru rocks are obviously anterior to the flowing and fully developed writing of the "Stein" documents of Khotān, with their graceful curves and picturesquely formed akṣaras. Witness Asoka's 𑂔 = 𑂔 and the 𑂔 of the Niya leather documents 𑂔.

There are, however, two Moḍī letters 𑂔 = 𑂔 and 𑂔 = 𑂔, which do not readily yield to treatment on the above general lines. The Devanāgarī 𑂔 is a clumsy letter to write, and, moreover, is a stumbling-block to all learners, as it is so liable to be confused with 𑂔 + 𑂔. Similarly in writing the Devanāgarī 𑂔 the pen has to be lifted twice from the point of contact with the manuscript before the top line is reached again for writing the following letter. It remains to suggest a possible explanation of the two corresponding Moḍī letters which are quite convenient to write in cursive script. A critical examination of the forms of these letters in the period prior to A.D. 1200 is necessary, and such examination shows that these two letters may be regarded as survivors from the ancient Brahmī and Kharoṣṭī scripts. The Kharoṣṭī 𑂔 of the Dutreuil de Rhins manuscript reads 𑂔, with a very elongated top, which was reduced in size, when the Niya documents were written, to 𑂔. As Kharoṣṭī was written from right to left, the letter would be reversed in Brahmī and Devanāgarī. Hence we find in Brahmī forms such as the following: 𑂔, 𑂔, 𑂔, 𑂔, the last being the prototype of the Devanāgarī 𑂔, the tail in the latter being an obvious addition. The development of the 𑂔, 𑂔, proceeded from the Brahmī letter 𑂔, seen in Asoka's Karli inscription. Precisely the same form appears in the Junnar cave inscriptions of the second century A.D. But an earlier form, that of Rudradāman, shows a more elongated right-hand curve, thus: 𑂔. The development into 𑂔 proceeded in the period A.D. 350-800. But

again in the period A.D. 800–1200 the left-hand “tail” is either lost (Kanheri ninth century ) or foreshortened (Mulrājā tenth century ). It is obvious, therefore, that the “tail” was not considered in mediaeval times to be an essential member of the body of the letter, and that after many vicissitudes only did it become fixed “more simiæ” in the Devanāgarī स. The Modī  may therefore be regarded as the final effort to get rid of the caudal appendage in the letter  + the connective . But the curl at the top has to be accounted for. Now, curiously enough, the Kuṣāṇa s (first, second century A.D.) is written . Hence the curl at the top of the Modī  may be regarded either as a throw-back to the Kuṣāṇa letter, or as the result of the artistic effort of the modern scribe with a view to distinguish the letter from  (व), which in very cursive script of the present day is written thus: .
